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SUBJECT: MEETING WITH KEY MILITARY OFFICIAL ABDEL AZIZ

REF: NOUAKCHOTT 77

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES CHARLES H. TWINING FOR REASON 1.4 (B,D
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¶1. (C) Summary. The Presidential election will be held as scheduled, without interference and in a transparent manner, according to one of the country's key military officers. Colonel Abdel Aziz said that the ruling Military Council will maintain its neutrality, while an individual, such as he, may choose to exercise his own right to support a candidate. He stated that the military is prepared to work with a new civilian leader, whoever it is, and will do its part to ensure the security of the country. This is a situation that merits continued monitoring. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Introduction. As we near the end of the transition period begun with the coup of August 3, 2005, the views of military leaders about the upcoming Presidential election, both its timing and whether to influence its results, as well as about the turnover of power to the civilian victor and the future role of the armed forces, are critical. No one outside the ruling circle knows to what degree key military personnel are united, but a major player in this is the person who was as responsible as any for waging the original coup d'etat, Colonel Mohamed Abdel Aziz (also spelled Abd El Aziz), member of the ruling CMJD (Military Council for Justice and Democracy) and Commander of the Presidential Guard. The 50 year old Colonel offered Charge and EmbOff his views in a January 26 meeting.

¶3. (C) The Coup and Aftermath. Abdel Aziz said tensions under an inflexible President Taya had been growing to the point that, had there not been a coup, the country was on the verge of explosion. Since the takeover, the military leaders have tried to establish a transitional government that would open up the country to democracy and allow the transfer to elected rule. They have adhered to their timetable, realizing that this is an "historic point" in the country's life. The series of elections since last November has gone well, anyone on both the Mauritanian and international sides wishing to observe them able to do so without hindrance. At the same time as the democratic process has taken hold, the leadership has sought to maintain full security. This has been visible and effective during the elections over the past three months and will be so during the March election.

¶4. (C) Military View of the Election. Abdel Aziz said the Presidential election has been long scheduled for the month of March and, despite wild rumors that the Military Council will seek to postpone it in order to prolong its rule, he insisted that the timetable will hold. We said most important would be government, and particularly Military Council, adherence to the commitment to maintain neutrality and ensure that the election is transparent and honest, with results that can be recognized by everyone. He agreed, insisting that the CMJD will honor its promises, that the

election will be completely open and transparent, without the stuffing of ballot boxes or other fraudulent actions as occurred during the previous regime, and the winner recognized, whoever that person turns out to be. He was obviously sensitive to the concept of neutrality and spoke at length, and with some passion, about it. Abdel Aziz noted that he as an individual is free to support anyone he chooses, even contributing money, like any other Mauritanian citizen. The line is clearly drawn, however, when it comes to the use of state funds. None of the latter can be spent to support a candidate. We said we agreed.

15. (C) Dialogue. Abdel Aziz volunteered that he has met with some of the leading candidates himself and expected that such discussions would be continuing. He said he has listened to their concerns, assured the candidates of government neutrality, and talked about the future. We observed that there could be merit in civilians and military leaders sitting down together and discussing hopes and concerns. The Colonel said that may be helpful but thought the same was being accomplished during these individual encounters, similar to many which have been underway.

16. (C) The Future. Colonel Abdel Aziz said he was tired. He has headed the Presidential Guard since 1998 and is always on call. He has been able to do very little travel outside the country since 2004. If ever he wants to go even to his home area several hundred kilometers to the north, he has to talk with President Vall personally and obtain his approval. Abdel Aziz said he has no desire to lead this kind of life indefinitely. Similarly, the military does not want to hold onto power. Much work needs to be done to secure the sparsely manned borders and fight against extremists. No new President can take over and not pay attention to those with

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knowledge of security. The Colonel sees a working relationship necessarily established with the new civilian President so that the armed forces will continue to assume their responsibilities in their area of knowledge and experience. He said that in his contacts he has not found a single important Presidential candidate who has not agreed that both sides can work together in the future for the benefit of the country. As Abdel Aziz put it, one needs security if there is going to be development, and if there is no development there is no security. We said we looked forward to expanding our cooperation with the armed forces following the transition, and he expressed pleasure and support.

17. (C) Comment. When rumors swirl about some, or all, members of the Military Council favoring, and supporting in various ways, a particular candidate -- specifically Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi (reftel), at least for now -- Colonel Abdel Aziz' name is invariably the first cited in that regard. Indeed, it was the only part of the conversation where he seemed to show any sensitivity. On the other hand, if the Colonel is merely backing a candidate as a private individual, he cannot be faulted; if his activity is part of a larger strategy of working for a particular candidate's election, that is something else. It was reassuring to hear the Colonel say the CMJD would adhere to its pledges regarding non-interference, the election schedule, and credible elections. Most important for the future will be the ability of the military establishment to work as a constructive part of the government under civilian control. While Abdel Aziz suggested there would be no problem with the military doing its part, the exact relationship will need to be carefully worked out as Mauritania enters a new period in its history. For the moment, we are watching the situation carefully, and meetings such as this provide a good opportunity to remind leaders of our expectations.

18. (C) Post Script. We spoke again with the Colonel after the President's January 27 speech in which he insisted that the CMJD intends to follow the rules to the letter and that,

after the transition, the armed forces will remain above politics (septel). Abdel Aziz said basically, I told you so.

He added that we can only hope the person elected will be good.

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